PilotOnline.com
January 29, 2007

The Quiet War: What the U.S. hopes to accomplish in Africa

Rod Budd, a Navy law enforcement officer based at Djibouti's Camp Lemonier, spends his days visiting village elders. Above, he speaks with Ali Waberi, a chief who told him how much the United States is needed in Djibouti. "Our only hope is God, and you guys," Waberi told him through an interpreter. CHRIS TYREE PHOTOS / THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

By KATE WILTROUT, The Virginian-Pilot

DJIBOUTI - As a Norfolk agent with the Naval Criminal Investigative Service, Rod Budd tracks down sailors suspected of crimes. Now, a continent away, he hunts bigger prey: terrorists.

Budd is gathering intelligence as the United States, already engaged in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, tries to keep the Horn of Africa from becoming the next conflict. The Navy, which plays a largely supporting role in the current wars, is leading the military effort on the ground in the Horn of Africa.

One of Budd's main tasks is to create relationships with local chiefs and ask them to look out for strangers - or weapons - passing through their desert villages. Somalia is just a dozen miles away, and refugees flow freely across that unstable country's border.

Budd, who expected the investigative service to send him to Iraq or Afghanistan, acknowledged he's winging it in Djibouti, relying on instincts cultivated throughout almost 20 years in law enforcement.

"Our job in Iraq and Afghanistan - albeit much more dangerous - it's inside the wire," Budd said, meaning agents toil on bases behind security checkpoints. "Here in Djibouti, you have a chance to actually go outside the wire and maybe - maybe - stumble upon a golden nugget. The potential to actually do something is a lot higher here than in the other places."

His task is to get to know the people around him, observe suspicious behavior and encourage them to contact him if they see something strange.

"This is the same thing as a cop on the beat who wants to know what's going on," Budd said. "He makes friends with people, and they tell him things. It's just a unique place to do it."

One day in November, he took a short drive from the well-guarded fences surrounding Camp Lemonier, the U.S. military base, to visit a village elder.

Chief Ali Waberi sat on a cot draped in mosquito netting and told Budd how much the United States is needed in Djibouti.

"Our only hope is God, and you guys," he said through the interpreter, Jafar Jama.

Sunlight streamed through gaps in the wooden boards. Flies were so thick that the old man handed his visitor a homemade fan to chase them off.

Then the chief expressed his disappointment.

"When the U.S. arrived here, we had big expectations. For 100 years, we've been praying for Americans to come over here," Waberi said. "Fortunately, they're here today."

But, Waberi said, "it looks like the benefits are going toward the urban people rather than the villagers."

Budd listened politely to the chief's complaint, but making lives better for the local people isn't his primary mission.

Still, sometimes he'll bring a case or two of bottled water; other times, soccer balls for the village children.

Another means of currying favor for the American anti-terrorism effort: arriving with a military doctor to treat sick villagers. On this visit, the first question Waberi asked was: "Where is the doctor?"

A week or two earlier, the agent had brought along a physician to examine the chief, who dealt with chronic knee pain by thrusting a stick heated in a fire into his knee to release endorphins and mute the underlying ache.

The doctor had cleaned out the wounds around his knee and given him ibuprofen for pain.

No doctor this time, but Budd had a drop of good news: The chief and other elders from surrounding villages would soon meet with Camp Lemonier's commanding officer, who would hear their concerns and pleas for jobs, a critical issue.

The same day he visited Waberi, Budd made a stop in the village of Nagad. On his way back to the car, a young man he'd never met approached Budd. He told the agent the village needed to corral its goats and sheep. Could he help with that?

Budd introduced himself to the man, then offered a question instead of an answer.

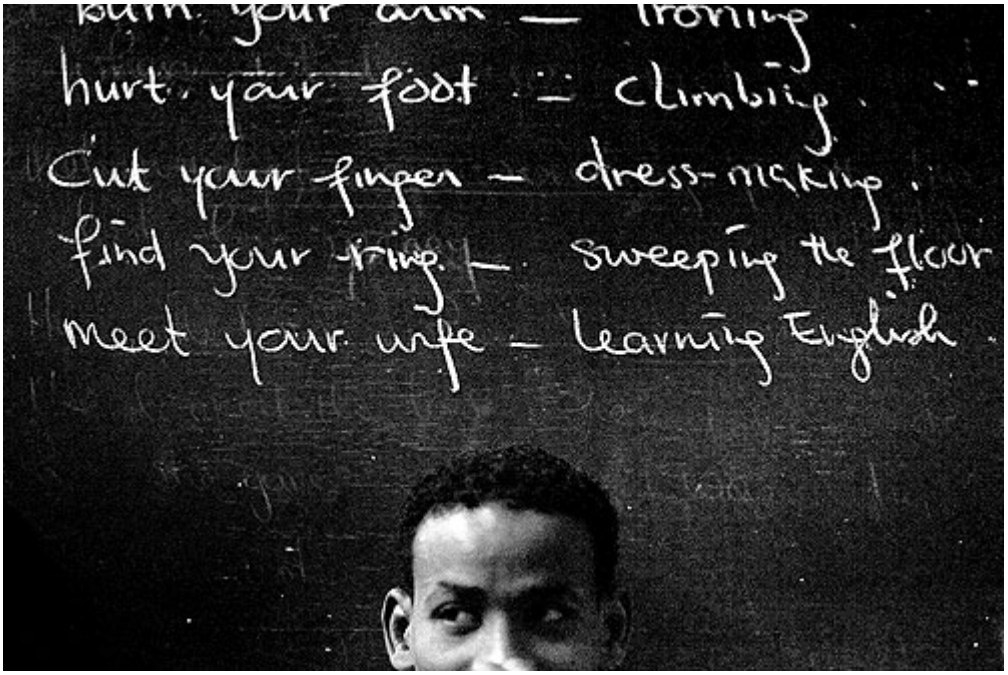
"Do you understand what my role is?" he asked.

He had Jama, the interpreter, explain that he didn't have the authority to carry out favors like that, but he would appreciate residents staying alert and getting in touch if they saw suspicious activity.

Budd delivered the message gently, with a handshake. "We'll see you again," he said.

To the head of the U.S. Central Command, which oversees the African task force, the military engagement in the Horn could be a model for strengthening a country and building relationships to prevent the spread of terrorism.

"Dollar for dollar and person for person, our return on investment out here is better than it is anywhere" in the vast command, Army Gen. John Abizaid said during a visit to Camp Lemonier in May.



Yasser Toube, above center, has a college degree and speaks four languages – Arabic, French, English and a tribal tongue. He and other young men in class see English as the key to their country's future, and they say they are glad the U.S. military has established a base in their capital.

Humanitarian work makes strategic sense, according to the theory behind the task force.

Lt. Cmdr. Robert Kearney, a member of the task force's core staff in Djibouti, said the military hopes to reach people who are poor, hopeless and have no one looking out for them. It's important to get to them before they are recruited by terrorists.

"They found out in Iraq and Afghanistan that for every insurgent, it takes 20 soldiers" to control the area where a guerrilla operates, Kearney said. "And as you know, we're running out."

It's tough to tell whether the United States is winning this quiet war and preventing a full-blown conflict. Sometimes, the victories are small.

Mouusi Abi is an example.

Like half the working-age population of Djibouti, the 29-year-old father of two is unemployed. He lost his job with an oil company in March, but since September, he has stayed busy helping a group of Navy Seabees construct a school bathroom in his neighborhood.

Abi simply showed up one day, with passable English that allowed him to converse with the 10-man crew from Port Hueneme, Calif. He totes heavy bags of cement and mortar and shoos away children who ask the Americans for water or throw pebbles over the fence.

It isn't a paying gig, but Abi hopes his help might lead to a job on base. For the U.S. military, Abi is a success - for his loyalty, not his lifting.

Abi has become a fan - and defender - of the Seabees.

Motioning to the prayer tower of a nearby mosque, Abi said the imam there doesn't like Americans working in the area, and he made those feelings public.

So Abi and fellow members of the neighborhood council visited the imam.

"They help us, and they help our children," Abi said they told the Muslim cleric. They asked him to keep his opinions to himself, and it seems to have worked: Abi said they haven't heard anything from the imam since.

That kind of intervention is exactly what top brass wants from the Combined Joint Task Force - Horn of Africa.

"We like to think that the activities we've done in these various nations have prevented terrorist activities," said Rear Adm. Timothy Moon, the task force's deputy commander. "Could we point to single ones we have stopped as a result of our efforts? No, we can't. I'm sure we have prevented something, but I couldn't put my finger on it."

Gains are gradual and can result from something as simple as helping Djibouti's young people connect with American culture through a language class.

Mouusi Abi, right, befriended the Seabees building a school bathroom in his neighborhood. Abi, an unemployed father of two, helps the Americans, hoping that his volunteer work – and passable English – lead to a paying job on the U.S. base at Camp Lemonier.

For Yasser Toube, that connection comes on Sunday nights, when a van full of Camp Lemonier personnel drives down a narrow, garbage-strewn street to the Horn of Africa School of Languages, where Toube goes to improve his English.

He is the kind of man terrorists would be lucky to recruit - young, unmarried, bright. He speaks French, Arabic and English besides his tribal tongue. He, too, is unemployed, with a widowed mother to care for.

In a room about the size of an American bedroom, 12 students - two of them female - squeezed onto bright blue wooden benches on a hot November night.

The hallway smelled of urine. A fan hanging from a buckled, wooden ceiling whirred slowly, but the room was muggy and hot. The window was shut to stop curious children from peering in and giggling.

Five service members in civilian clothes came this night, including a Navy petty officer, an Air Force senior master sergeant and an Army major.

The discussion topic: a l-Jazeera's recent foray into English-language news programs and whether such programs are accurate and fair.

Their comments - about Western news outlets covering Africa from only a European or U.S. perspective, and criticizing al-Jazeera's grisly footage of Muslim casualties in Iraq and Palestinian territories - offered the American visitors some understanding of moderate Muslims who don't hate the United States but question the war in Iraq.

The students agree that English is the key to their nation's future - not French, taught in schools even since Djibouti gained its independence from France in 1977. T hey agree that the U.S. presence - in the form of Camp Lemonier - is helping Djibouti progress.

"Before the Americans came to Djibouti, it was like a dead zone," Toube said. "People were living in a very critical condition. But now there's two or three weddings every night."

"People are very happy.... They've begun building houses. They've begun to plan for their life and their future."

Still, this country has far to go.

At least in this classroom of Muslim students, Western ideals - not Islamic fundamentalism - have taken root.

"For Djibouti to be a free and prosperous nation," Toube said, "we need this kind of culture that teaches people freedom, teaches people to be open, teaches people to be democratic."

Young girls in Djibouti face a difficult path to their schooling. Only about 40 percent of girls attend primary school, and after that, many are forced to drop out because their parents don't want them traveling farther to middle schools, which are limited

It's not just the military spreading that message in Africa.

The U.S. diplomatic corps is helping. That's why career diplomat Stuart Symington spent a year in Norfolk training top military officers to work hand in hand with U.S. embassies overseas.

Symington taught at the Joint Forces Staff College in Norfolk last year before being named ambassador to Djibouti, where he's putting those lessons into action.

He summarized the mission of both the military and the foreign service officers at the U.S. Embassy, first in French and then again in English: "We can give you walls, and we can redo the roof and the air conditioning and paint the walls, but the only thing that really matters in this country is you, the parents and the students," he told local teachers at a continuing-education seminar in the capital.

"On peut ouvrir la porte, mais c'est vous de passer. "

"We can open the door, but you have to go through it."

The same November day, Symington traveled to the town of Goubeto to bestow middle school scholarships on 18 young girls - part of an effort to give 1,000 scholarships to girls across the country. Girls are often forced to quit school by families unwilling to have them travel farther to middle schools.

"May the bright light that I see in your eyes today shine in your hearts and in your country," Symington told the girls after shaking each one's hand.

Despite hopeful words, there is no certainty American efforts will ultimately raise this struggling nation out of the hopelessness and poverty that attract terrorists.

Budd, the agent with the Navy's investigative service, worries that his friendly village visits spread false hope rather than defuse terrorism.

"Sometimes it gives you an empty feeling," Budd said while driving away from Nagad. "But you do what you can do. Everybody does their little part."

Budd, who will resume his job in Norfolk next month, believes in his mission. But he's unsure how the American effort will turn out.

"This is kind of like throwing a ball out there and seeing if anybody catches it," Budd said.

"There's no magic to it, just a matter of maybe - someday - it will pay off."

- *Reach Kate Wiltrout at (757) 446-2629 or kate.wiltrout@pilotonline.com.*